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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

The Body in Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey

by

© Karys Andra Van de Pitte

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 1995

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DEGREE: **Masters of Arts**

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED: **1995**

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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November 9, 1993

Abstract

In this thesis I study the body as it occurs in Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey. I explore the body according to four categories: the felt body, the body as the self perceives it, how the self perceives other bodies, and the unfree body. I focus primarily on the lived bodily experience of the first person narrator, Agnes Grey. In the category of the felt body we see Agnes' body as the field of conflict between her natural physical feelings, like stress or sexuality, and the way in which she can consciously experience those feelings in the context of her repressive society. In the category of the body as the self perceives it, I discuss Jean Paul Sartre's notion that we can never really perceive ourselves except through the gaze of others, and I explore the ways in which Agnes, as well as other characters in the novel, need the gaze, and the ways in which Agnes progresses in self confidence in the face of that gaze. In the category of the way the self perceives other bodies, I examine how the self reads other bodies and their gestures, and also how the body can be used to hide inner feelings. Under the category of the unfree body I explore how extraordinarily constrained is Agnes' body in the context of her two positions as governess. Her body comes to be more free over the course of the novel.

To my parents and to my friends--both animal and human--who have made this "year of the thesis" possible. And to Parzifal.

Acknowledgments

... to Juliet for kindness and patience, to Paul for typing.

Table of Contents

Preamble:	Notions of the Body	1
Introduction		9
Chapter One:	The Felt Body	13
Chapter Two:	The Body As the Self Perceives It	31
Chapter Three:	How the Self Perceives Other Bodies	42
Chapter Four:	The Unfree Body	63
Bibliography		72

Preamble

Notions of the Body

In retrospect, my initial notions of mastering THE theories of THE body, and then applying them to Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey, can only be seen as naive. For the most important thing that I have learned in studying the body is that I have not the faintest notion of what the body is, that I strongly suspect that no one else has either, and that I fear even that the notion of understanding the body--or at least of talking about understanding the body--is logically contradictory. Dramatic exaggeration? Perhaps, but let me explain.

When I began this project, I thought of the body as simply a physical thing through which "the self" relates to the world. The "self" was a physical one, in the sense of its being a mind essentially based on chemical reactions in the brain, but the self was still primarily a mind which science had just happened to discover to be embodied. I thought of myself as a monist--someone who believes that there is no mind or soul separate from the body--but in fact my thinking was very dualistic, since I was thinking of the mind as a thing entirely different in kind from the

body, even if dependent upon it.

This kind of thinking--about the mind as distinct from the body--is in fact profoundly entrenched in our language. The Oxford English Dictionary's definitions of "body" illustrate this nicely by showing that the body is primarily held to be "that which is not mind," and that even where the body is given credit for feeling, it is always perceived as non-rational, non-thinking. The body is

> I. the material frame of man (and animals). 1. The physical or material frame or structure of man or of any animal: The whole material organism viewed as an organic entity. ... b. often contrasted with the soul. ... c. The corporeal or material nature or state of man, the material body and its properties. ... 5. The main portion of the animal frame, to which the extremities, etc. are attached; the trunk. Opposed to the members or limbs; also to the head, esp. as the seat of intelligence and guidance.

In reading about the body, however, I quickly came to see that the body is much more fundamentally a part of the self, that in fact the mind and body interrelate so intimately that we can draw no clear line of distinction between them. The mind has some control over the body and it certainly affects the body psychosomatically (a problematic term which I suspect assumes a clear line between mind and body), but the body has as much control in the relationship as does the mind. When the mind deludes itself about stresses or pains, the body may protest with

illness. Certainly the needs of the body occupy most of the mind's time, be it in search of rest, exercise, food, comfort, safety or sexual gratification.

The matter is further complicated when one comes to look at the body in the light of post-modern theory. There, both body and mind are constructions, and we are taught to think of them in certain ways by our society. The twentieth century's interest in anthropological comparisons of cultures has shown how very arbitrary are our notions of ourselves and our bodies; that even our distinction between mind and body may be just another Western invention. Apparently many Asian traditions do not assume a sharp distinction between mind and body, as Thomas P. Kasulis points out in his introduction to Self As Body in Asian Theory and Practice (xv).

Not only is the body perceived differently by different cultures, but each individual person seems to have their own very personal notion of what the body is, as I found in each new work I read for this project. Thus it seems that the body is no one thing to all "men"--that in that sense it cannot truly be defined. In keeping with this, it has been cheering to note that while pre-twentieth-century writers are often very certain about their theories of the body, very few recent writers are daringly sure in talking about the body. This may in part be due to a difference in styles of writing, but I think it

has also become clear, in the context of modern pluralism, that although we can think and feel about the body, we cannot know it.

It is strange that something that is so intimate a part of us could be unknowable, particularly as the body has been for so long thought of as safely defined very much along the lines of the Oxford English Dictionary's opinions. On the other hand, however, the decline of Descartes' dualism has necessarily had an enormous effect upon our notions of the body. If the mind and body are one organism, then that means that the mind can have no (illusion) of having an objective view of the body: the two have too much effect upon each other for there to be enough distance for the mind to observe from.

More significantly, however, I think that we cannot know the body rationally because it is non-rational. It is something that we can know only by feeling. If knowledge is purely rational, then it makes sense that we could never know the body, but even if the body is somehow intuitively knowable, that knowledge is still not one that would be describable within the confines of our language, so entrenched in rationality as it is. I have found it amusing to think that Descartes was all wrong in his "cogito": surely before we think, we feel and thus are.

This is not, of course, to say that I do not recognize the value of our thinking about the body and trying to know

it as best we can, but it is to say that the task, if it aspires to finding any conclusions, is finally impossible. Thus the title of this section: "'Notions' of the Body." I have found myself very uncomfortable with the phrase "theories of the body," because the word "theory" has come to have so many connotations of scientific investigation, while I feel that the body is essentially unknowable in that way.

Thus, also, the approach that I have taken in reading for and writing this "essai": after much reading I came to realize that I never would find a writer with whose theories I felt comfortable enough to take them as my own and apply them to Agnes Grey. Thus I tried to read widely, and simply absorb "notions" about the body, finding that there were many ways to talk about these ideas in the context of Anne Brontë's novel. It will become evident, though, despite my disclaiming allegiances, that I have found the work of
Jean Paul Sartre, and less directly, Simone de Beauvoir, particularly interesting. This is because of their emphasis on how individual selves interrelate through their bodies.

A number of problems have arisen in the project. For one, it has been hard not to recognize the arbitrariness of choosing Anne Brontë's novel as the work to which to apply what I have learned of the body. (In fact, my oh, so

sympathetic family has been amused by how easily my work could be applied to Moby Dick, and have come up with a fund of jokes applying theories to the whale's body.) In thinking about the body in the context of Brontë's work, however, I have come to see that she is in fact an eminently suitable writer upon whom to focus, because the body figures so largely in her work. The reader will be pleased to hear that Brontë, at least, thought that the body was in some ways knowable, so that there will be at least one source of epistemological confidence to anchor this project.

Given her strong religious background--Church of England, tinctured by a gloomy Methodism--Anne was naturally a confirmed dualist, and of course I have been troubled by the problem of applying modern holistic notions of the body to a novelist who takes the separation between mind/soul and body to be so great. In the end, however, thinking about Brontë's work in modern terms has proved remarkably rewarding, for it seems to me that despite her consciously dualistic stance, modern notions of the body emerge in the novels. In describing human experience, and particularly with her emphasis on feeling--both emotion and sensation--Brontë cannot help but show how profound the connection between mind and body is. In fact, in her work, the body is shown to be much more "in tune" with the mind than it would be in a modern work, though this may be

primarily due to the Romantic tendencies of her time. Nevertheless, it is hard not to think, with the naivety which is the legacy of every philosophical age, that despite her dualistic loyalties, Brontë cannot help but let "the truth" of the self's holism shine out.

Brontë's use of Agnes as first person narrator and the portrayal of her experience makes her work particularly rewarding to study in this light, and so I have primarily, though not exclusively, focussed on her narrator-protagonist, Agnes. Elizabeth Langland points out that Brontë is innovative in her use of a first person female narrator. She writes, in her Anne Brontë,

> The technique of [Agnes Grey and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall] is as innovative as the subject matter. ... In both novels, a privileging of the woman as narrator allows Anne to create a female reality formerly uncharted in novels. Male writers such as Samuel Richardson (Pamela and Clarissa) and Daniel Defoe (Moll Flanders and Roxana) had employed female narrators, and women writers like Jane Austen and Fanny Burney had used third-person narrators who took a female point of view, but women writers had not yet claimed for themselves the authority of speaking directly through a woman as narrator. It allowed new freedoms for developing the woman's perspective in the world. (31)

There are exceptions to this--in fact Frances Burney does use a first person narrator in her epistolary novel, Evelina--but in the main Langland's point holds.

I have also found that my primary interests in the body lie in the way that the self and other selves relate to the body, how the two interrelate, and the effect which

that has upon us as people. Thus, in exploring some of the various facets of the body in Agnes Grey, I have chosen to systematize the examination by following a series of categories. I will first look at the ways in which the self most immediately feels the body, then at how the self thinks of the body, then at how the self perceives other bodies. I will conclude by looking at the category of the unfree body in the novel.

Introduction

Agnes Grey is particularly rewarding to examine in terms of the body because it is so rich in the narrator's descriptions of her own bodily experience. In fact, Agnes' relation to her body serves as one of the dominant themes of the novel, if one agrees with Elizabeth Langland's statement that as a governess "Agnes will serve in two posts, the first of which will challenge her physically, the other spiritually" (Langland 100). This is a pleasingly tidy reading of the novel, although its very tidiness may provoke one to question it. Also, it is a reading which insists upon a dualistic interpretation of the novel, opposing body to spirit. This might be justified by an appeal to how Brontë or Agnes herself might view the body, but if one tries to look at the novel in terms of the more modern perception of the body and the mind as one, then Langland's reading may seem far too simple. In any case, if one were to ask Agnes, she might well say that her physical trials in her first position cause her no little psychological torment. In the same vein, the desires of Agnes' body are in a large part

responsible for the spiritual trials that she must endure in her position with the Murrays--though of that, given Victorian repression of female sexuality, Agnes might be less capable of speaking.

One of the reasons why Agnes Grey is interesting in terms of the body is that it is based so much on Brontë's own lived experience. There is the passion of personal recollection in so many of the narrator's descriptions, and when she describes the feelings of her body, the detail recollected is often convincing enough that one cannot help but suspect that her creator's memory is at work. It is a sorry truth that one is particularly inclined to remember painful experiences, and it is certainly true that descriptions of Agnes' physical trials are far more in evidence than those of any pleasant physical experiences. The ways in which she is tormented by both the Bloomfield and Murray children, and by her apparently unrequited love for Mr. Weston, mirror experiences in Brontë's own life. Most of Brontë's biographers draw strong parallels between Agnes' and Brontë's life, while Winifred Gerin (her most devoted biographer) feels free, in her Anne Brontë, to quote extensively from Agnes Grey when telling us of Brontë's life, particulary when setting before us her grim time with the Inghams/Bloomfields and about her unrequited love for Weightman/Weston.

I should at the outset admit a certain uneasiness

about referring to biography in literary criticism. Agnes Grey is autobiographical fiction, and it is not my intention to examine the degree to which it is either one or the other. Thus, in the main, I have avoided any references to Brontë's biography, but I do several times indulge in referring to her poems. These are very personal, and a number of her poems are thought to have been written in reference to some of the experiences that Brontë draws upon in writing Agnes Grey. Primarily, I simply find her poems interesting. Brontë does, however, include one of her poems in Agnes Grey--her poem speaks for Agnes. It seems to me that some of her other poems may speak for Agnes as well, giving an insight into her feelings.

While Agnes' focus on her body may make this novel a particularly interesting study, we are also, because of her being first-person narrator, put in the position of never really seeing Agnes except through her own eyes. Other than Agnes's own, the only description we ever get of her is from her mother. Mrs. Grey says to Agnes after her first gruelling governessing position, "...let me tell you, you are a good deal paler and thinner than when you first left home" (111). Later, when, unbeknownst to her mother, Agnes is pining after Weston, the man she loves, her mother says, "Agnes, this sea air and change of scene do you no good, I think; I never saw you look so wretched.

It must be that you sit too much, and allow the cares of the school-room to worry you" (224). Thus we hear only the sick Agnes described by an "outsider." Agnes herself, in talking of looking at her face in the mirror, says,

> I never could derive any consolation from such a study: I could discover no beauty in those marked features, that pale hollow cheek, and ordinary brown hair; there might be intellect in the forehead, there might be expression in the dark grey eyes, but what of that?...a low Grecian brow, and large black eyes devoid of sentiment would be esteemed far preferable. (192)

And that depressed picture is the most that we ever see of our heroine. We can in no way trust her unselfconfident estimation of herself, and can only be grateful that she grants herself "intellect in the forehead" and "expression in the dark grey eyes." Fortunately, however, there are many other bodies described in detail in the novel, so we will not be too much at a loss for bodies to discuss.

Chapter One

The Felt Body

By "the felt body," I am trying to refer to what I see as the primary level at which we experience the body, the body as it is most immediate to the self. This is the body which relates to the world with its five (or more) senses, the body which experiences pleasure and pain, the body in sickness and health. This is the body over which the mind has very little control, the body that very often reflects and sometimes even rules the mind. Over the course of Agnes Grey we see that Agnes' body is the field of conflict between her natural physical feelings and the ways in which she is consciously permitted to experience those feelings in the context of her repressive society.

What is most immediately felt by Agnes, for a great part of the novel, is physical discomfort. In her two governessing positions she is often tired, hungry, cold or otherwise uncomfortable. Her experiences with the Bloomfields are by far the most difficult--her unruly pupils make her job an actual physical strain. She writes,

> The task of instruction was as arduous for the

> body as the mind. I had to run after my pupils to catch them, to carry, or drag them to the table, and often forcibly to hold them there, till the lesson was done.
>
> ***
>
> Sometimes [Tom] would determine to do his writing badly; and I had to hold his hand to prevent him from purposely blotting or disfiguring the paper. Frequently, I threatened that, if he did not do better, he should have another line: then, he would stubbornly refuse to write this line; and I, to save my word, had finally to resort to the expedient of holding his fingers upon the pen, and forcibly drawing his hand up and down till, in spite of his resistance, the line was in some sort completed.
>
> ***
>
> Mary Ann...apparently preferred rolling on the floor to any other amusement. Down she would drop like a leaden weight; and when I, with great difficulty, had succeeded in rooting her thence, I had still to hold her up with one arm, while, with the other, I held the book from which she was to read or spell her lesson. As the dead weight of the big girl of six became too heavy for one arm to bear, I transferred it to the other; or, if both were weary of the burden, I carried her into a corner, and told her she might come out when she could find the use of her feet, and stand up; but she generally preferred lying there like a log till dinner or tea time.... (86-87)

"[L]ittle Fanny," when Agnes comes to know her, is "alarmingly fond of exercising her two favourite weapons of offence and defence: that of spitting in the faces of those who incurred her displeasure, and bellowing like a bull when her unreasonable desires were not gratified" (90).

Helena Michie, in her The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies, points out that Agnes Grey is extraordinary for its time in the degree to which it

focusses on the heroine's physical trials. As she writes,

> The narrator herself seems self-conscious about the detail with which she tells her story, claiming she has
>
> > ...not enumerated half the vexatious propensities of my pupils, or half the troubles resulting from my heavy responsibilities, for fear of trespassing on the reader's patience; as perhaps I have already done. (Michie 37)

Since Brontë and/or Agnes apparently think(s) it not lady-like to dwell so much on physical details of this kind, it is interesting that it is seen as perfectly lady-like to talk about the body's illnesses. This is very likely a hold-over from the eighteenth-century notion of the virtue of sensibility. In Agnes Grey, illness is always a psychosomatic reflection of inner turmoil, emphasizing how intimately mind and body are related in Brontë's world. This is not limited only to Agnes' experience: Agnes' father, through weakness, allows himself to decline into ill-health. When the family loses its fortune, we hear that Agnes' father "was completely overwhelmed by the calamity--health, strength, and spirits sank beneath the blow" (65). His decline is described: "And thus the mind preyed upon the body, and disordered the system of the nerves, and they in turn increased the troubles of the mind, till by action, and reaction, his health was seriously impaired" (65). Agnes' mother says to him "there is nothing like a cheerful mind for keeping the

body in health" (110), but he most uncheerfully declines into death.

Agnes is definitely her father's daughter in the way that her body responds to stress. At the Bloomfields', Agnes reacts to her mental and physical distress by becoming "paler and thinner," as her mother, quoted in the introduction, tells her. In her second position, with the Murrays, Agnes is prone to headaches and nausea, as when she is inconsiderately treated and made to "be crushed [in the carriage] into the corner farthest from the open window, and with [her] back to the horses" (126).

Agnes is also, however, the daughter of her mother, "a woman of spirit" (61), and achieving control over her body's weakness will be one of the goals she must attain over the course of the novel. On the second occasion when Agnes' mother refers to her appearance, calling her "wretched" looking, it is because Agnes has let herself waste away in her longing for Mr. Weston. Agnes says,

> inwardly her observation startled me. I knew my strength was declining, my appetite had failed, and I was grown listless and desponding;--and if, indeed, he could never care for me, and I could never see him more ... then, life must be a burden, and if my heavenly Father would call me away, should be glad to rest; but it would not do to die and leave my mother--Selfish, unworthy daughter, to forget her for a moment! ...
>
> So said I in my heart, and from that hour I only permitted my thoughts to wander to Edward Weston--or at least to dwell upon him now and then ... as a treat for rare occasions; and whether it was really the approach of summer, or the effect of these good resolutions, or the

> lapse of time, or all together, tranquility of mind was soon restored, and bodily health and vigour began likewise, slowly, but surely to return. (225)

Thus Agnes, unlike her father, recognizes the selfishness of letting herself decline, and disciplines her mind and body in order to live. In fact, it is only when she has achieved this strength and independence that her Weston is returned to her--she has become worthy to be his wife.

Until that most happy end of the novel, however, Brontë makes good use of Agnes' bodily responses to stresses to show us her psychological state. This occurs not only in the case of actual illnesses, but also in more immediate reactions. When Agnes leaves home she says that "a sudden anguish seemed to swell my heart" (70), and later "[m]y heart sank" (71). As she approaches her employers' home, she says "my heart failed me" (73). She "strained every nerve" to keep the Bloomfield children from tormenting house guests (106), and when Agnes has a mild suspicion that Weston may care for her, her "heart throbbed in answer to the question" (185). Agnes' body is being used to show her state of mind.

We take for granted that mental strains are often experienced physically, but for Brontë and Agnes, joy, too, is a very physical and sensual thing. Brontë's poem, "Lines Composed In a Wood On a Windy Day," illustrates very nicely the sensual nature of joy:

My soul is awakened, my spirit is soaring,
And carried aloft on the wings of the breeze;
For, above, and around me, the wild wind is
roaring
Arousing to rapture the earth and the seas.

The long withered grass in the sunshine is
glancing,
The bare trees are tossing their branches on
high;
The dead leaves beneath them are merrily dancing,
The white clouds are scudding across the blue
sky.

I wish I could see how the ocean is lashing
The foam of its billows to whirlwinds of spray,
I wish I could see how its proud waves are
dashing
And hear the wild roar of their thunder today!
(Poems 88)

In Agnes, we get a similar sense of the way in which happiness is very much a sensual thing. We hear of the good times that she and her sister had spent together: "What happy hours Mary and I have passed, while sitting at our work by the fire, or wandering on the heath-clad hills, or idling under the weeping birch (the only considerable tree in the garden), talking of future happiness to ourselves and our parents ..." (64). When she speaks of the sorrows of leaving her home, the things she thinks of missing are very sensual:

I had taken my last ramble with Mary on the
moors, my last walk in the garden and round the
house; I had fed, with her, our pet pigeons for
the last time .... I had given a farewell stroke
to all their silky backs as they crowded in my
lap. I had tenderly kissed my own peculiar
favourites, the pair of snow-white fantails; I
had played my last tune on the old familiar
piano, and sung my last song to papa ....
My dear little friend, the kitten, would

> certainly be changed .... I had romped with her for the last time; and when I stroked her soft bright fur, while she lay purring herself to sleep in my lap, it was with a feeling of sadness I could not easily disguise. (71)

When we hear of Agnes' first few "frugal" meals at the Bloomfields', of tough beefsteaks and half-cold potatoes, of cold meat and bread, we can guess that her stay there will not be a happy one.

Agnes' very physical joy and stress fit in well with the Romantic ethos of her day, as well as harking back to eighteenth-century conceptions of sensibility. However, they may also be seen in another light. In the section called "The Corporeality of the Feeling Self," in his article, "The Bodily Nature of the Self or What Descartes Should Have Conceded Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia," Albert A. Johnstone makes a point that should perhaps be obvious, but which I yet found very interesting. He speaks of emotions in general:

> Feelings are ... primarily a specific state of one's tactile-kinaesthetic or felt body. To convince oneself of the fact, one need only cast a quick introspective glance at one's felt body in any emotional situation ....
> Let us briefly consider what might be found with regard to one emotion, anger, and flesh out the evidence from there. When one is in the throes of a vigorous rage, a furtive glance at the feelings involved encounters a wealth of newcomers on the normally benign scene of one's tactile-kinaesthetic body: a choking, seething throat, congestion in the face, a tingling in the scalp, a coursing thumping in temples and chest, a tension in the brow and round the eyes, a pent up energy in thorax and arms, a churning in the abdomen, shaking in the knees, and gripping in

> the toes. Each of these various feelings is a modification of the tactile-kinaesthetic body. Each occupies a certain vaguely defined volume of tactile-kinaesthetic space; it has a location with respect to the others--it is adjacent to, between, or distant from the other feelings; it is not simply a discrete qualitative presence but is also a certain felt dynamics continuous with the tensions elsewhere in one's tactile-kinaesthetic complex. For this reason, it is nonsensical to ask where one is angry, not because anger is nowhere, but because it is everywhere throughout one's felt body. Likewise they constitute the substance of the anger. Short of these tactile-kinaesthetic feelings, the tensions and dynamics specific to felt anger, one would not be angry.
>
> It is of course true that feelings are not the only constituents of the anger. There is also an awareness of grievances, an awareness of the person (or situation) toward whom (or which) the anger is directed. The anger is also in part a modification of one's mode of reasoning, as also of one's mode of perceiving, since one's seeing and hearing are altered by the tactile-kinaesthetic commotion. Nevertheless, the feelings are the essential constituent of the anger in the sense that they are the determining constituent: if the feelings specific to anger were removed, the remaining state of awareness would qualify rather as indifference or calm. The point is quite forcefully made by William James in the following passage: "<u>If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind</u>, no 'mind-stuff' out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains." (Sheets-Johnstone 28-29)

Agnes certainly experiences anger physically, as when she cannot suppress her annoyance with her nagging employer, Mr. Bloomfield: " seizing the poker, I dashed it repeatedly into the cinders, and stirred them up with unwonted energy; thus easing my irritation, under pretence

of mending the fire" (100).

If emotions and feelings are thus so fundamentally physical, then Brontë, with her emphasis on the body, may not just be a "physical" person who thus tends to bring bodily experience into her writing. Brontë may rather be expressing a fundamental truth of human existence--that in order for a "self"--even what we think of as a mind or soul--to think, feel or experience anything, it must be part of a body. Agnes' body, with its great sensitivity, makes her a person capable of great feeling.

As a tangent to this, I find very interesting eighteenth-century ideas about the interrelation of body and character, particularly the relation of sensibility to morality, part of which involves the principle that the degree of one's sensibility may be founded on the sensitivity of one's sensual perceptions. John Wiltshire, when writing of this notion in Jane Austen and the Body, quotes the 1797 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica's definition of "sensibility": "a nice and delicate perception of pleasure or pain, beauty or deformity. It is very nearly allied to taste; and as far as it is natural seems to depend upon the organization of the nervous system" (Wiltshire 31). According to eighteenth-century conceptions, this sensibility was a virtue allied to morality--morality being an ability to feel for others. It seems to me that the Romantics pick up on this notion in

their belief that the person who feels genuinely--(as yet) untrammelled by the opinions of society--will be the good one.

Although in Agnes Grey there is never any distinct reference to either eighteenth-century or Romantic conceptions, this idea of sensibility tying into morality still emerges. Agnes and Weston have a sort of bodily sympathy for others, so that, for example, it hurts, even disgusts them, to see a leveret hunted by Matilda and her dog. Here is the scene from Agnes' perspective:

> Matilda now came panting back, with the lacerated body of the young hare in her hand.
> 'Was it your intention to kill that hare, or to save it, Miss Murray?' asked Mr. Weston, apparently puzzled at her gleeful countenance.
> 'I pretended to want to save it,' she answered, honestly enough, 'as it was so glaringly out of season; but I was better pleased to see it killed. However, you can both witness that I couldn't help it; Prince was determined to have her; and he clutched her by the back and killed her in a minute! Wasn't it a noble chase?'
> 'Very! for a young lady after a leveret.'
> There was a quiet sarcasm in the tone of his reply which was not lost upon her; she shrugged her shoulders, and, turning away with a significant 'Humph!' asked me how I had enjoyed the fun.
> I replied that I saw no fun in the matter; but admitted that I had not observed the transaction very narrowly.
> 'Didn't you see how it doubled--just like an old hare? and didn't you hear it scream?'
> 'I'm happy to say I did not.'
> 'It cried out just like a child.' (208-9)

No one else in the novel seems to have much bodily sympathy for others. Certainly, all the members of the upper-middle

class have no regard for the physical difficulties of Agnes' situation. Nor have they any empathy for any one else not of their class. We hear that Rosalie and Matilda Murray have no sympathy for the cottagers about their father's estate, and an even more dramatic example of callousness can be found in their rector, Mr. Hatfield. He occasionally visited a "poor labourer who was in the last stage of a consumption" "on which occasions, he would always insist upon having the cottage door kept open to admit the fresh air for his own convenience, without considering how it might injure the sufferer" (153).

Hatfield is of course a foil to Weston, his curate, who is well-loved by the cottagers. The wife of the consumptive labourer tells Agnes, of Weston, that

> "about three wik sin', when he seed how poor Jem shivered wi' cold, an' what pitiful fires we kept, he axed if wer stock o' coals was nearly done. I telled him it was, an' we was ill set to get more--but you know, mum, I didn' think o' him helping us--but howsever, he sent us a sack o' coals next day ...." (154)

Agnes, of course, also visits the cottagers and gives them what help she can. In fact, it is in this worthy context that she first gets to know Mr. Weston.

Probably the most dramatic example of a lack of bodily sensibility is in the Bloomfield children, particularly in the unforgettable Tom. Agnes asks what he does with the birds her traps, and he says,

> 'Different things. Sometimes I give them to

> the cat; sometimes I cut them in pieces with my penknife; but the next, I mean to roast alive.'
>
> 'And why do you mean to do such a horrible thing?'
>
> 'For two reasons; first, to see how long it will live--and then, to see what it will taste like.'
>
> 'But don't you know it is extremely wicked to do such things? Remember, the birds can feel as well as you; and think, how would you like it yourself?'
>
> 'Oh, that's nothing! I'm not a bird, and I can't feel what I do to them.' (78)

And, interestingly enough, he can't. Since his elders only encourage him in these attitudes, there is little hope that he will ever become a man of any sensitivity. His social class has doomed him to brutal callousness.

I have saved the most cheerful part of the discussion of the felt body until last, that of sexuality. My justification for talking about sexuality under "The Felt Body," rather than under the heading of my next chapter, "The Body As the Self Perceives It," is that for Agnes, for any woman in the society of Brontë's time, sexuality cannot be an acknowledged thing. In order for Agnes to be a woman, a heroine and a narrator whom both Brontë and her nineteenth-century readers could respect, her sexuality must be repressed, a matter for her body only to reveal--as long as it can do so with subtlety. We cannot, of course, know whether this repression of sexuality in Agnes Grey is a conscious one on the part of Brontë. I think that we can better trust that Agnes is fiercely trying to repress any sexual desire that she may feel.

Mary Poovey, in her Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, makes the point that it was in fact the job of governesses to repress sexuality both in themselves and in their pupils.

> The periodical essayists of the 1840s justified the attention they devoted to the distressed governess by emphasizing the central role she played in reproducing the domestic ideal. As a teacher and example for young children, they argued, the governess was charged with inculcating domestic virtues and, especially in the case of young girls, with teaching the "accomplishments" that would attract a good husband without allowing the sexual component of these accomplishments to get the upper hand. The governess was therefore expected to preside over the contradiction written into the domestic ideal--in the sense both that she was meant to police the emergence of undue assertiveness or sexuality in her maturing charges and that she was expected not to display willfulness or desires herself. Theoretically, the governess's position neutralized whatever temptation she, as a young woman herself, might have presented to her male associates; to gentlemen she was a "tabooed woman," and to male servants she was as unapproachable as any other middle-class lady. (Poovey 128)

Thus Agnes is in a position where she is forced to repress her sexuality.

Despite this, hints of Agnes' sexual nature do emerge. Simone de Beauvoir, in her section of The Second Sex, "The Formative Years: The Young Girl," makes a connection between the sensuality of a teenage girl--especially in her love of nature--and her emerging sexuality. We see this sensuality both in Brontë and her poetry, and in Agnes, with the pleasure she takes in nature and with the very

sensual nature of her happiness.

Another hint of Agnes' sexuality is the very physical character of her affection. She expresses her love for her various pets most physically and she says of when she was a child,

> I could not imagine more afflictive punishment than for my mother to refuse to kiss me at night: the very idea was terrible; more than the idea I never felt, for, happily, I never committed a crime that was deemed worthy of such a penalty. (89)

One scene in particular shows the instinctive physicality of Agnes' affection toward both animals and humans. Agnes is walking along the ocean, revelling in the power of the wind and waves, when, she is surprised to see a dog that she had known at the Murrays'. She writes,

> Almost as much delighted as himself, I caught the little creature in my arms, and kissed him repeatedly. But how came he to be there? He could not have dropped from the sky, or come all that way alone: it must be either his master, the rat-catcher, or somebody else that had brought him; so, repressing my extravagant caresses, and endeavouring to repress likewise, I looked round, and beheld--Mr. Weston!
>
> 'Your dog remembers you well, Miss Grey,' said he, warmly grasping the hand I offered him, without clearly knowing what I was about. (242)

Weston's affection, constrained though he is by his position as nineteenth-century curate, seems to be a physical one too. Even when he and Agnes first encounter each other after their long separation, one hint that he feels a more than merely friendly affection for her is a physical one. As Agnes tells us, "we had ... begun to

ascend the precipitous road leading into the town. Here my companion offered me his arm, which I accepted, though not with the intention of using it as a support." (She admits this!) "When we had surmounted the acclivity, I was about to withdraw my arm from his, but by a slight tightening of the elbow was tacitly informed that such was not his will, and accordingly desisted" (245). We can hope that the two will be well matched.

There is in Agnes Grey far more direct reference to Agnes' sexual desire than a mere emphasis on the physicality of her affection. Agnes either believes, or tries to imply, that her love for Weston is simply based on great respect--"it is not the man, it is his goodness that I love" (188)--but she certainly does seem to enjoy looking at the man, nevertheless. This is revealed in a number of passages. She writes: "Sunday was now become a day of peculiar delight to me ... for I liked to hear him--and I liked to see him, too, though I knew he was not handsome, or even what is called agreeable, in outward aspect; but, certainly, he was not ugly" (156). On another occasion she remembers his words after a meeting with him "and recalled every intonation of his deep, clear voice, every flash of his quick, brown eye, and every gleam of his pleasant, but too transient smile." Even Agnes recognizes that she is revealing here more than she properly should, for she writes, "Such a confession will look very absurd, I fear--

but no matter--I have written it; and they that read it will not know the writer" (175). Aha! A guilty conscience. Later, she writes again of the pleasures of Sundays: "at church I might look without fear of scorn or censure upon a form and face more pleasing to me than the most beautiful of God's creations" (188). It is in this kind of situation, where her conscience makes her suspect that all is not entirely proper, that she must deny that she loves anything of Weston excepting his virtue. We can only sympathize with the war that is occurring in Agnes between ideology and flesh.

It is interesting that while Agnes seems to feel that she must disguise her interest in the physical aspects of her lover, Brontë, in her own poetry, does not. She did not publish this following piece, which is thought to be written with reference to her beloved Willy Weightman (Poems 171), among her poems, but she did see fit to include it in her novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Interestingly enough, however, it is not a poem written or sung by the novel's heroine, but it is put into the mouth of the slut of the novel, Arabella, who sings it. The heroine, Helen, does however admire and remember the song.

Farewell to thee! but not farewell
To all my fondest thoughts of thee:
Within my heart they still shall dwell;
And they shall cheer and comfort me.
O, beautiful, and full of grace!
If thou hadst never met mine eye,
I had not dreamed a living face

Could fancied charms so far outvie.

If I may ne'er behold again
`That form and face so dear to me,
Nor hear thy voice, still would I fain
Preserve, for aye, their memory.

That voice, the magic of whose tone
Can wake an echo in my breast,
Creating feelings that, alone,
Can make my tranced spirit blest.

That laughing eye, whose sunny beam
My memory would not cherish less;--
And oh, that smile! whose joyous gleam
No mortal language can express.

Adieu, but let me cherish, still,
The hope with which I cannot part.
Contempt may wound, and coldness chill,
But still it lingers in my heart.

And who can tell but Heaven, at last,
May answer all my thousand prayers,
And bid the future pay the past
With joy for anguish, smiles for tears?
(Poems 76-77, Tenant 182)

Note the references to "beauty," "grace," "form," a dear "living face" outvying "fancied Charms," a "laughing eye," a voice of magic tone. The laughing eye and the joyous smile convey the sense of a cheerful and lively spirit, but the lover's physical attractiveness and vitality are primarily what seem to be remembered. It is in fact fit that Arabella would sing so physical a song, as it is fit that the heroine, Helen,--like Agnes, a sexual woman trapped in the mores of her time--should be touched by it. That Brontë wrote the poem originally for herself may reveal much about her as well.

To return to Agnes Grey, there are yet more explicit

indications, inscribed in Agnes' body, of her desire for Weston. For one, we see in her the archetypal sexual blush. When Weston merely hints to her that he may desire a life's companion, she tells us that he "looked at me as he concluded; and the flash of his dark eyes seemed to set my face on fire, greatly to my own disconcertion, for to evince confusion at such a juncture was intolerable" (244). To blush is "intolerable"--Agnes herself recognizes what she is revealing.

When Agnes comes home from her encounter with Weston, her mother is concerned:

> 'Well, Agnes, you must not take such long walks again before breakfast,' said my mother, observing that I drank an extra cup of coffee and ate nothing--pleading the heat of the weather, and the fatigue of my long walk as an excuse. I certainly did feel feverish, and tired too. (246)

If Mrs. Grey could only be trusted enough by her daughter to know that Agnes' fever is a factor of her love for a good and honourable man, with her realistic good sense she would be far less worried.

In these many ways we can see that Agnes is a person whose lived experience is a very bodily one. Her stresses as well as her joys are felt as much by her body as by her psyche--if we are to agree with Albert Johnstone, the self can experience emotions in no other way. While her physical sensitivity may help to make Agnes an interesting protagonist and may even, according to some notions, make

her a more virtuous human being, it also causes her much suffering. This is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the conflict between Agnes' sexual desires and the repressive ideology which informs her sense of herself.

Chapter Two

The Body As the Self Perceives It

By "the body as the self perceives it," as opposed to "the felt body," I am trying to draw a perhaps very artificial line between the body that to us seems simply given to us, the one that we feel sensuously long before we think about it, and the body that we consciously think about, the one that we are always aware of in relation to the world around us. I will use Jean Paul Sartre's notion of "the gaze" to try to explore some of the ways in which Agnes and other characters think of their bodies.

In Being and Nothingness, Sartre sets forth the idea that the self can never see itself meaningfully except in the context of being seen by others. One of his most famous examples of this is that of the feeling shame:

> I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it. ... But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed. It is certain that my shame is not reflective, for the presence of another in my consciousness, even as a catalyst, is incompatible with the reflective attitude; in the field of my reflection I can never meet with anything but the consciousness which is mine.

> But the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other.
>
> By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. Yet this object which has appeared to the Other is not an empty image in the mind of another. Such an image, in fact, would be imputable wholly to the Other and so could not "touch" me. I could feel irritation, or anger before it as before a bad portrait of myself which gives to my expression an ugliness or baseness which I do not have, but I could not be touched to the quick. Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me. (Sartre 302)

Another example of Sartre's is that of shyness, an affliction that Agnes frequently suffers from.

> The experience of my alienation is made in and through affective structures such as, for example, shyness. To "feel oneself blushing," to "feel oneself sweating," etc., are inaccurate expressions which the shy person uses to describe his state; what he really means is that he is vividly and constantly conscious of his body not as it is for him but as it is for the Other. We often say that the shy man is "embarrassed by his own body." Actually this expression is incorrect; I can not be embarrassed by my own body as I exist in it. It is my body as it is for the Other which may embarrass me. (Sartre 462-3)

I think that Sartre's insight that we see ourselves through others is a profound one. I see the process that he describes as inevitable, but I also see it as rather more complex and problematic than he describes it to be. For one, I worry about the notion that "Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me" (Sartre 302). How can I know how the Other sees me? I

have only my own perceptions (really guesses) of how the Other sees me. Where does my sense of what the Other perceives me to be come from, other than from myself and from my interpretations of the Other's body? I may be mistaken. A possible example of this may occur when Agnes meets her first employer, Mrs. Bloomfield. Agnes describes this encounter partly through what she guesses to be Mrs. Bloomfield's impressions, and she cares deeply how she is seen, and feels humiliated:

> I ... was so fully occupied in steadying my nerves, and stilling the rebellious flutter of my heart, that when I was admitted into the hall, and ushered into the presence of Mrs. Bloomfield, I almost forgot to answer her polite salutation; and it afterwards struck me that the little I did say, was spoken in the tone of one half-dead or half-asleep. (74)

Agnes may well be wrong about the impression she created.

Another problem with Sartre's notion is that even if we could know how the Other sees us, it would only make sense to take her/his view of us if we could respect the light in which he/she saw us. If the upper-middle class people who surround Agnes see her as insignificant, drab and boring, Agnes at least <u>should</u> not think of herself as such, because their perspective is a highly skewed one.

As an unselfconfident person, Agnes does have to fight seeing herself as those around her do. It seems to me that this is, in fact, one of the greatest causes of Agnes' unhappiness for much of the novel. Her instinctive view of

herself simply does not agree with that of those around her. She sees herself as having many reasons for self-respect, and yet is treated contemptuously by almost everyone about her. Thus very often the Other's perceptions may not be worth taking into account.

Another thing to consider is that very often in thinking about the self and/or one's body, one does not actually have to be seen by another to be self-conscious. One may simply imagine or worry that another is looking at one, as in the example of making a vulgar gesture. As well, the Other that we see ourselves in terms of may simply be "the Other" in the sense of an internalized societal norm--we must not scratch certain parts of our bodies--so that the Other can simply be the self watching itself, policing itself with the values society has taught it. Thus, often "I recognize that I <u>am</u>" as a very imaginary Other might see me.

Given Sartre's notion that in order to see ourselves we need to do so through Others, it makes sense that in order to see oneself as significant, one needs to be so seen by Others--one needs to see oneself as thought worth being seen by Others. Certainly Rosalie Murray, never having read Sartre, and thus not knowing that being seen by Others is in fact being made into an object, seems to be barely capable of survival without the gaze of Others--particularly men. One example of this occurs when Rosalie

is furious that Weston does not look at her, on the first occasion that she sees him. She says to Agnes,

> Did you see how he went out of church? stumping along, as if there were nobody there but himself--never looking to the right hand or the left, and evidently thinking of nothing but just getting out of the church, and perhaps, home to his dinner--his great stupid head could contain no other idea. (138)

It might almost be said that Rosalie's whole callous plot to conquer Weston's heart, which so hurts Agnes both by keeping her away from him and by making her fear for his feelings, is provoked by this simple failure to have noticed her.

It is not just the vain Rosalie who thinks this way, however. Even Agnes needs to be seen by Others. She talks of how uncomfortable it is to walk back from church with the Murray daughters and their friends:

> As none of the before-mentioned ladies and gentlemen ever noticed me, it was disagreeable to walk beside them ... and if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on vacancy--as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so. (162)

Agnes takes the only revenge upon them that she can, by ignoring them as they ignore her, as well as by simply putting herself into a position where she is not available to be ignored. As she says,

> I gave myself no little trouble in my endeavours (if I did keep up with them) to appear perfectly unconscious or regardless of their presence, as if I were wholly absorbed in my own reflections, or the contemplation of surrounding objects; or,

> if I lingered behind, it was some bird or insect, some tree or flower, that attracted my attention, and having duly examined that, I would pursue my walk alone, at a leisurely pace, until my pupils had bid adieu to their companions, and turned off into the quiet, private road. (162)

One of the things that endears Weston to Agnes is that he deigns formally to recognize her. Of the first occasion they meet in person, Agnes says, "seeing me, he acknowledged my presence by a slight bow. I should have been invisible to Hatfield, or any other gentleman of those parts" (158).

While what Agnes misses is simply a recognition from Others of her existence, Rosalie needs more than that--she must have their admiration. If being seen by Others is, as according to Sartre, being made into an object, then Rosalie would probably quite willingly accept this--in fact she almost seems to see herself as an object, one that she has only to groom and adorn in order to be admirable. It is so very characteristic of her to say to Agnes, "you will ... see me in my splendid new dress! I shall be so charming, you'll be ready to worship me" (131). For her, her body is what will impress. What makes it most impressive is the way in which it can relate to--really compete with--other bodies. Describing to Agnes her coming-out ball, she says,

> The ladies, of course, were of no consequence to me, except to put me in a good humour with myself, by showing how ugly and awkward most of them were; and the best, mamma told me,--the most

> transcendent beauties among them, were nothing to me. (134)

Rosalie is content.

Elizabeth Langland points out that it is highly improbable that Brontë would have at least consciously seen Wollstonecraft as much of an influence, given "the scandal that erupted upon Godwin's publication of his Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and of Wollstonecraft's letters to Gilbert Imlay" (Langland 39), but she also points out how similar Brontë's views are to Wollstonecraft's as expressed in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. I would add that Brontë's criticisms on Agnes' female pupils sound very much like Wollstonecraft when she writes, in the Vindication, "But in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment" (23). Rosalie seems a very apt illustration of Wollstonecraft's--and Brontë's--worries.

This emphasis on purely physical characteristics is indeed the root of several of Agnes' pupils' problems. Little Mary Ann Bloomfield is like this, especially when encouraged by her uncle, Mr. Robson.

> Mary Ann was something of a favourite. He was continually encouraging her tendency to affectation (which I had done my utmost to crush), talking about her pretty face, and filling her head with all manner of conceited notions concerning her personal appearance (which I had instructed her regard as dust in the balance compared with the cultivation of her mind

> and manners); and I never saw a child so susceptible of flattery as she was (102).

Rosalie Murray is much worse, of course. Her whole life seems devoted to her body and to the attention it can garner. Interestingly enough, however, Brontë goes to the trouble of pointing out that the problem is not only a feminine one, when she describes the way in which Mr. Robson is vain enough to damage his body for appearance's sake:

> He was a thick-set, strongly-built man, but he had found some means of compressing his waist into a remarkably small compass, and that, together with the unnatural stiffness of his form, showed that the lofty-minded, manly Mr Robson, the scorner of the female sex, was not above the foppery of stays. (102)

His character, like the characters of all the other vain people in the novel, seems to suffer because of his focus on the appearance of his body.

Given this contempt for vanity, I find somewhat puzzling Brontë and Agnes' wholesale dismissal of Matilda Murray, a "veritable hoyden," "big-boned and awkward," who "thought she was well enough but cared little about the matter" (123). Because "still less did she care about the cultivation of her mind and the acquisition of ornamental accomplishments" (123), because she is a tomboy and primarily wants to spend her time playing in the stables and galloping about on her horses, she is viewed even less sympathetically than her sister Rosalie. For Brontë one

cannot be weak and vain, yet one cannot be too strong and indelicate ... a difficult fine line to negotiate.

We must presume, however, that Brontë's heroine Agnes negotiates that line as Brontë would have her do, at least by the end of the novel. Agnes starts out by not worrying a great deal about her appearance, but after she encounters Weston, her attitude begins to change. She says,

> As I am in the way of confessions, I may as well acknowledge that, about this time, I paid more attention to dress than ever I had done before ... this is not saying much, for hitherto I had been a little neglectful in that particular...but now, also, it is no uncommon thing to spend as much as two minutes in the contemplation of my own image in the glass .... (192)

Her own rather gloomy description of her physical features ("marked features ... pale hollow cheek ... ordinary brown hair" [192]) follows this ... Agnes never really does come, over the course of the novel, to see her body as attractive. We do see here, however, that through clothing she does try to make herself more appealing. This is a very good sign. Douwe Tiemersma, in his Body Schema and Body Image, talks about the significance of clothing.

> Whatever comes into contact with the surface of our body is more or less incorporated in the body image. So, clothing is part of our body image and is imbued with narcissistic libido. With a change in clothes we change our attitude. (Tiemersma 84)

Agnes does, in fact, seem to become more self-confident once she pays more attention to her appearance. Toward the end of the novel she has left the Murrays and has become as

independent as a Victorian woman living with her mother can be. Agnes has pity on her ex-pupil Rosalie, now a bored, physically confined, unhappily married woman, and goes to visit her at her husband's grand estate.

> I was rather annoyed at her evident efforts to reassure me, and prevent me from being overwhelmed by so much grandeur; too much awed at the idea of encountering her husband and mother-in-law, or too much ashamed of my own humble appearance--I was not ashamed of it at all; for, though plain, I had taken good care not to be shabby or mean, and should have been pretty considerably at my ease, if my condescending hostess had not taken such manifest pains to make me so .... (228)

This kind of confidence is very new in Agnes.

As a final note to this chapter, I would like to talk about how Agnes perceives her body in the context of the degree to which she is willing to give in to its impulses. Modern psychotherapy says that it is healthy to allow the body to express inner turmoil. In the beginning of her novel, Agnes seems reluctant to allow this. When she first meets Mrs. Bloomfield she is busy in "steadying [her] nerves, and stilling the rebellious flutter of [her] heart" (74). Sometimes she may be destructive to herself by denying impulses of her body. Agnes says, of living at the Bloomfields', "in all the bliss of solitude, I have given myself up to the luxury of an unrestricted burst of weeping. But this was a weakness I did not often indulge" (94). By the time she arrives at the Murrays', however, her attitude is rather more realistic. She writes: "I sat

down beside the small, smouldering fire, and amused myself with a hearty fit of crying; after which I said my prayers, and then, feeling considerably relieved, began to prepare for bed ..." (117). Of course, before the end of the novel, Agnes will have so much given in to the impulses of her body's response to psychic trauma that it will occur to her to die for love of Weston. And she will have to take control of her body and learn to perceive it with respect before she can gain her just rewards.

So it is that the self can only ever conceptualize itself in relation to others--it needs the gaze of others. This can be problematic as in the case of vain women like Rosalie who are too dependent upon others' admiration of them (she languishes when taken away from the eyes of London), but being contented and willing to be seen can be healthy as in the case of the later more selfconfident Agnes, who finally learns to think of herself as perfectly worthy to be seen. In all, moderation seems to be the rule.

Chapter Three

How the Self Perceives Other Bodies

In the last chapter I referred to Jean Paul Sartre's notion that when the self is perceived by the other it is made into an object. Sartre speaks of this "objectivation" as being intolerable and talks about our defences against it. "The objectivation of the Other, as we shall see, is a defense on the part of my being which, precisely by conferring on the Other a being for-me, frees me from my being-for the Other" (Sartre 359).

> Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being an object; that is, of recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have "fallen" into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am .... The reaction to shame will consist exactly in apprehending as an object the one who apprehended my own object-state.
>
> In fact from the moment that the Other appears to me as an object, his subjectivity becomes a simple property of the object considered. It is degraded and is defined as "an ensemble of objective properties which on principle elude me." The Other-as-Object "has" a subjectivity as this hollow box has "an inside." In this way I recover myself, for I can not be an

object for an object. (Sartre 384)

It seems to me that there is one point in the novel where Agnes manages to defend herself against a kind of objectivation by herself objectifying ... it just takes getting her angry enough. The most disturbing scene in the novel occurs when Tom Bloomfield is given a "brood of little callow nestlings" (birds) to torture by his uncle Robson (103). Agnes realizes that she must do something to prevent Tom's cruelty, and as a last resort drops a large stone on the nestlings so that they will at least be killed quickly. Tom flies into a rage and his uncle is amused, promising to get him another brood on the next day.

> 'If you do, Mr. Robson, I shall kill them too,' said I.
> 'Humph!' replied he, and having honoured me with a broad stare, which, contrary to his expectations, I sustained without flinching, he turned away with an air of supreme contempt, and stalked into the house. (105)

Agnes wins her first staring contest of the novel.

Of course the process is never really that simple. As Frederick A. Olafson says in his article on Sartre in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy,

> In relation to this intrusive "other," I can adopt either of two courses of action. I can try to dominate it and suppress its transcendence by which my own is threatened, or I can try to make myself into an object to be dominated by the liberty of the other person. In either case, I am destined to fail because I must recognize my liberty (or that of the other) in order to suppress it. (Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol. 7, 292)

Thus, as selves, we are doomed to this eternal power struggle with the Other.

Our perception of others does of course involve much more than this fundamental struggle for power. We can only relate to others by our reading of their bodies, which is one of the most basic and immediate human tendencies. I will divide my discussion of how we read others' bodies into two crude sections, one of immobile bodies and one of bodies in motion.

The static body was sometimes seen to be far more legible in the nineteenth century than it is now. Remnants of the theory of physiognomy were still to be found, and phrenology as a science was still taken very seriously. Physiognomy was in fact so strict a system that Lavater could give these rules for analyzing a face:

> If we take the countenance as the representative and epitome of the three divisions, then will the forehead, to the eye-brows, be the mirror, or image, of the understanding; the nose and cheeks the image of the mores and sensitive life; while the eye will be to the whole as its summary and centre. (Lavater 10)

Brontë does not subscribe to this kind of rule in any serious way. However, if we read some of her carefully detailed descriptions of her characters, we can see very clearly that their bodies exactly suit their temperaments. The rules that Brontë follows are more like instinctive human prejudices, a sort of shorthand of appearance that in white Western culture we can all read, whether we have

picked it up from those around us, from literature, or now from the mass media. I am talking about signs to be read on the level of "fat ladies are jolly" and but also on somewhat more realistic grounds like "people with red noses may be heavy drinkers."

The chilling Mrs. Bloomfield "was a tall, spare, stately woman, with thick black hair, cold grey eyes, and extremely sallow complexion" (74). She sounds rather like a reserved witch. The shallow, nagging, mediocre Mr. Bloomfield, "was a man of ordinary stature--rather below than above, and rather thin than stout ... he had a large mouth, pale, dingy complexion, milky blue eyes, and hair the colour of hempen cord" (82). Both of these characters look sickly, and Mr. Bloomfield sounds as repulsively insignificant in body as in mind. The evil and arrogant uncle Robson, provider of avian victims (and wearer of stays) is

> a tall, self-sufficient fellow, with dark hair and sallow complexion like his sister, a nose that seemed to disdain the earth, and little grey eyes, frequently half closed, with a mixture of real stupidity and affected contempt of all surrounding objects. (102)

He seems a masculine version of his sister Mrs. Bloomfield, with the addition of his haughty nose and petty eyes.

The Murrays are fortunately generally more physically appealing than the Bloomfields. "Mr Murray was, by all accounts, a blustering, roystering, country squire ... a

tall, stout gentleman with scarlet cheeks and crimson nose" (119). He, healthy and alcoholic, will predictably prove to be harmless.

> Miss Murray, otherwise Rosalie, was about sixteen when I came, and decidedly a very pretty girl; and in two years longer, as time more completely developed her form, and added grace to her carriage and deportment, she was positively beautiful; and that in no common degree. She was tall and slender, but not thin, perfectly formed, exquisitely fair, but not without a brilliant, healthy bloom; her hair, which she wore in a profusion of long ringlets, was of a very light brown, strongly inclining to yellow, her eyes were pale blue, but so clear and bright that few would wish them darker, the rest of her features were small, but not quite regular, and not remarkable otherwise, but altogether you could not hesitate to pronounce her a very lovely girl. (121)

I will discuss the significance of Rosalie's beauty later--her body is one of the most complex to read in the novel--but here it seems relevant that she is so fair and with small features, which may indicate a weakness of character.

> Miss Matilda Murray was a veritable hoyden.... She was about two years and a half younger than her sister; her features were larger, her complexion much darker. She might possibly make a handsome woman, but she was far too big-boned and awkward ever to be called a pretty girl, and, at present, she cared little about it. Rosalie knew all her charms, and thought them even greater than they were, and valued them more highly than she ought to have done, had they been three times as great; Matilda thought she was well enough, but cared little about the matter .... (123)

Matilda's body suits her coarseness of character perfectly.

The most evil character of the novel, the dissolute

Sir Thomas Ashby, whom Rosalie is manipulated into marrying both by her mother and her own wholesale imbibing of her society's mercenary values, is by far the most repulsive. Agnes says,

> He was tall, thin and wasted, with a slight stoop in the shoulders, a pale face, but somewhat blotchy, and disagreeably red about the eye-lids, plain features, and a general appearance of languor and flatness, relieved by a sinister expression about the mouth and the dull, soulless eyes. (236)

Not a man to meet in a dark alley. His is a face whose mediocrity is only relieved by evil. Bad characters are sickly and ugly. Mixed characters have mixed but signifigant features. Brontë's descriptions give a strong impression of character, be it only by appealing to our poorer instincts, such as our tendency to be repulsed by sickly bodies as well as minds.

I find interesting that excepting the cute but obnoxious Fanny Bloomfield, Rosalie is the only character whose appearance does not clearly reflect her inner state: she is very beautiful externally, as she is not internally. Arthur Marwick, in his book, Beauty in History, makes a distinction between what he calls "modern" and "traditional" notions of beauty. The modern conception of beauty is one of beauty as "purely physical, an autonomous characteristic to be ranked along with social position, wealth, education, race, etc.," while the traditional conception of beauty holds that

> beautiful people are inherently virtuous and identified with truth and the divine, and vice versa, that the divinely virtuous are inevitably beautiful .... Taken to its logical conclusion, as it was in the Middle Ages, and much later, this notion held further that ugly people are inherently vicious and evil, and vice versa, that the vicious and evil are inevitably ugly. (15-16)

Given these two opposing notions of beauty, it is interesting that Brontë would see fit to use both of them in the novel, allowing Rosalie's outer beauty to belie her inner moral weakness. Perhaps Brontë needs to make an exception in Rosalie in order to make her Wollstonecraftian points about how damaging a focus on women's bodies over their minds can be.

Beauty is very different in the cases of Agnes and in Weston. Jerome Stolnitz, in his entry on "Beauty" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, speaks of a radical change in aesthetics that took place during the eighteenth century. Before the eighteenth century, beauty was thought to be (and had been thought to be since Plato) an objective property in things, something that can be critically known, and even defined by rules. During the eighteenth century, however, influenced by the work of the British Empiricists, the emphasis in thinking on beauty came to rest on the spectator's felt response. Stolnitz quotes Frances Hutcheson (1725) announcing the "new locus for beauty": "Let it be observed, that in the following papers, the word beauty is taken for the idea raised in us." Stolnitz

continues, "It follows that any object whatever that does in fact excite this idea must be judged to be beautiful" (vol. I, 265). In any case, the significance in this is that what is beautiful is that which is felt to be beautiful.

This may help to explain why Agnes so enjoys looking at Weston. He has only to raise the idea of beauty in her--and surely his moral virtues do not hurt in this process. Here is Agnes' description of Weston:

> In stature, he was a little--a very little--above the middle size; perfectly symmetrical in figure, deep-chested, and strongly built; the outline of his face would be pronounced too square for beauty, but to me it announced decision of character; his dark brown hair was not carefully curled ... but simply brushed aside over a broad, white forehead; the eyebrows, I suppose, were too projecting, but from under those dark brows there gleamed an eye of singular power, brown in colour, not large, and somewhat deep set, but strikingly brilliant, and full of expression; there was character, too, in the mouth, something that bespoke a man of firm purpose and an habitual thinker. (156)

We get a sense that much of what she can see in him depends on her own perceptive abilities. He is for her what she makes of him. We can see this very clearly when we contrast Agnes' view of him with Rosalie's, who says of Weston that he is "such a beast! ... I can give you his description in three words ... an insensate, ugly, stupid blockhead" (136). Thus for the shallow Rosalie, Weston does not make rise in her the idea of beauty or attractiveness, while for Agnes he does. For him too, if

we can tell by his behaviour, Agnes makes rise the impression of at least some beauty. Thus the good (and the modern) Agnes and Weston have the perception to read inner beauty, while others do not.

Agnes writes very movingly about what the absence of beauty means to her, of how one's body can affect others' attitude toward and their treatment of us.

> We are naturally disposed to love what gives us pleasure, and what is more pleasing than a beautiful face ... when we know no harm of the possessor at least? A little girl loves her bird ... Why? ... Because it lives and feels, because it is helpless and harmless. A toad, likewise, lives and feels, and is equally helpless and harmless; but though she would not hurt a toad, she cannot love it like the bird, with its graceful form, soft feathers, and bright, speaking eyes. If a woman is fair and amiable, she is praised for both qualities, but especially the former, by the bulk of mankind: if, on the other hand, she is disagreeable in person and character, the plainness is commonly inveighed against as her greatest crime, because to common observers, it gives the greatest offence; while if she is plain and good, provided she is a person of retiring manners and secluded life, no one ever knows of her goodness, except her immediate connections; others, on the contrary, are disposed to form unfavourable opinions of her mind and disposition, if it be but to excuse themselves for their instinctive dislike of one so unfavoured by nature; and vice versa with her whose angel form conceals a vicious heart or sheds a false, deceitful charm over defects and foibles that would not be tolerated in another.
>
> They that have beauty, let them be thankful for it, and make a good use of it, like any other talent; they that have it not, let them console themselves, and do the best they can without it--certainly, though liable to be over-estimated, it is a gift of God, and not to be despised. Many will feel this, who have felt they could love, and whose hearts tell them they are worthy to be loved again, while yet they are debarred, by the

> lack of this or some such seeming trifle, from giving and receiving that happiness they seem almost made to feel and to impart. (192-93)

Agnes' point here is that no one will bother to get to know a woman who lacks the beauty to attract attention. Needless to say, Agnes is here in a despairing moment; it has not yet occurred to her that Weston may have the perception to see beauty in her, to appreciate "the intellect in the forehead," the "expression in the dark grey eyes" that she describes in herself. Agnes is very right, though, in her saying that humans are instinctively attracted to beauty. Rosalie, for example, does attract all those around her, and she is forgiven much for her beauty. Even Agnes, despite suffering so much at her hands, cannot help but like her and be seduced by her charm. No doubt Agnes' time as governess would be easier if her beauty were a more obvious one.

While we instinctively, if not wisely, read much from the static body, our readings of the moving body are only sometimes more accurate. Agnes Grey abounds in words like "demeanour," "air" and "manner." If we look at the Oxford English Dictionary we see that all of these are based on physical attitudes.

"Demeanour" is a "[m]anner of comporting oneself outwardly or towards others; bearing, (outward) behaviour. (The usual current sense.)" (OED 2). Mrs. Bloomfield shows her dislike for her mother in law "in an excess of frigid

formality in her demeanour" (98). When Agnes kills the birds, Tom's playthings, Mrs. Bloomfield's "aspect and demeanour were doubly dark and chill" (105). The maid and man who deliver luggage at Robinsons' are "neither of them very respectful in their demeanour to [Agnes]" (117).

"Air" is "Manner, appearance." "Outward appearance, apparent character, manner, look, style." "Of a person: Mien, demeanour, attitude, gesture, manner, look" (last ref: 1822, Byron). "Mien or gesture (expressive of a personal quality or emotion)." "An assumed manner, affected appearance, show" (OED III, 13, 14, 14d, 15). The maid at the Murrays has "the air of one conferring an unusual favour" when she undertakes the sending up of Agnes' things (117). At one point, uncle Robson turns away "with an air of supreme contempt" (105).

"Manner" is "[o]utward bearing, deportment, or style of address. With reference to a speaker: Characteristic style of attitude, gesture, and utterance" (OED 5). We hear that Mrs. Bloomfield is at one point "somewhat chilly in her manner" (74), and of "a certain supercilious insolence of tone and manner" in her brother (102). When Weston first speaks to Agnes after her father has died, we hear that "there was sincere good will, and even deep, touching, unobtrusive sympathy in the tone and manner of the inquiry" (218).

Manner can be deliberately assumed or it can be

involuntary. Once Agnes is insulted by Mr. Bloomfield's mother, Agnes cannot treat her the same way:

> Doubtless it would have been my interest still to meet her with the same cheerful smile and tone of respectful cordiality as before; but I could not, if I would; my manner altered with my feelings, and became so cold and shy that she could not fail to notice it. (96)

Agnes often can't control her body, as when Mrs. Murray reprimands her unreasonably. We hear of the scene, "'However, I don't want to vex you,' added she, seeing, I suppose, that my cheeks burned and my hand trembled with some unamiable emotion. 'Do, pray, try not to be so touchy!'" (169).

Another thing that can tell us much of someone's attitude or character is the position of their body. This is evident in the passage quoted in the last chapter where Agnes is so worried about where to place her body in relation to the Others' bodies on the way home from church. Another example occurs upon Agnes' first encounter with Tom Bloomfield. Then, while she is trying to warm herself after her freezing drive, we hear that Tom "stood bolt upright between [her] and the fire, with his hands behind his back" (76). This is our first broad hint as to Tom's inconsiderate character.

All of these readings of the body are reasonably subtle, but Brontë does sometimes fall into using some rather more obvious, and obviously literary, movements of

the body as a sort of shorthand to show its inner state. This happens repeatedly. When Mr. Bloomfield is angry, we hear of him "with his hair on end and his pale blue eyes bolting from their sockets" (95). Mr. Hatfield goes "perfectly white in the face" when Rosalie refuses his proposal (176)--though to be fair, this is only according to Rosalie. These at least are physical attitudes that cannot easily be voluntarily assumed, but when Agnes' mother receives a letter from her father who has long disowned her, we hear that she bit "her lip and knit her brows as if in anger" (213-14). This seems to me far more the response of an actress than of the gentlewoman that Agnes' mother is meant to be. Agnes learns of her father's reluctance to see her go a-governessing--and reveals it to us-- by noting that "a tear glistened in his eye" when he speaks of it (68).

It is in Agnes' attempts to read Weston's body that we see how torturing it can be to be uncertain of how to read someone else's body. This next scene is a positive one, but the one that follows causes Agnes no little anxiety. In the first case, a glance from Weston temporarily gives Agnes hope that he may care for her: "One glance he gave, one little smile at parting --it was but for a moment, but therein I read, or thought I read, a meaning that kindled in my heart a brighter flame of hope than had ever yet arisen" (189). This is the scene which Agnes must dwell on

for a year before she can interpret it, however:

> 'Good-bye, Mr. Weston,' I said ... Oh, how I struggled to say it calmly! I gave him my hand. He retained it a few seconds in his.
> 'It is possible we may meet again,' said he, 'will it be of any consequence to you whether we do or not?'
> 'Yes, I should be very happy to see you again.'
> I could say no less. He kindly pressed my hand, and went. (220-21)

Agnes wants to base her hopes on "the tone and manner in which he spoke" (223), but she says to herself,

> 'Oh, that is nonsense! he always speaks impressively; and at that moment, there were the Greens and Miss Matilda Murray just before, and other people passing by, and he was obliged to stand close beside you, and to speak very low, unless he wished everybody to hear what he said, which--though it was nothing at all particular--of course, he would rather not.'
> But then, above all, that emphatic, yet gentle pressure of the hand, which seemed to say, '<u>Trust me</u>,' and many other things besides--too delightful, almost too flattering, to be repeated, even to one's self.
> 'Egregious folly--too absurd to require contradiction ... mere inventions of the imagination; which you ought to be ashamed of.' (224)

Fortunately, Weston eventually gets more explicit in his body language, and we see how sometimes the body can be very clearly intended to be read. We hear that from him "there was no lack of kind words and kinder looks, no end of delicate attentions, too fine and subtle to be grasped by words, and, therefore, indescribable--but deeply felt at heart" (248).

He soon says, after he has declared himself,

> You must have known that it was not my way to flatter and talk soft nonsense, or even to speak the admiration that I felt; and that a single word or glance of mine meant more than the honeyed phrases and fervent protestations of most other men. (250)

The man is either remarkably naive or remarkably insensitive--Agnes could well have used a little more clarity to set her mind at ease.

Other characters in the novel clearly equally intend their bodies to be read. "Mr. and Mrs. Murray generally thought it sufficient to show themselves at church once in the course of the day" (126). Agnes tells us, "Mr. Robson seldom deigned to notice me; and when he did, it was with a certain supercilious insolence of tone and manner that convinced me that he was no gentleman, though it was intended to have a contrary effect" (102). Mr. Hatfield is full of affected poses. We hear of him as

> the rector ... who would come sailing up the aisle, or rather sweeping along like a whirlwind, with his rich silk gown flying behind him and rustling against the pew doors, mount the pulpit like a conqueror ascending his triumphant car; then, sinking on the velvet cushion in an attitude of studied grace, remain in silent prostration for a certain time, then mutter over a Collect, and gabble through the Lord's Prayer, rise, draw off one bright lavender glove to give the congregation the benefit of his sparkling rings, lightly pass his fingers through his well-curled hair, flourish a cambric handkerchief .... (140)

After Hatfield hits Snap "a resounding thwack" upon his skull, Agnes says that she "stooped to caress the dog, with ostentatious pity to show my disapproval of his severity"--

he of course paying no attention to her, because the magnetic Rosalie is nearby (170).

It is interesting that Weston is the only character who has much success (and that only at the end of the novel) in making his body speak. In all of the other cases, given above, the body fails to convey its message, at least to some of its audience. Agnes is not convinced by their church attendance of the senior Murrays' piousness; Mr. Robson intends to impress Ann with his manner but fails; Mr. Hatfield's dramatic affectation may impress some of his audience, but to Agnes it only reveals his folly and makes her--and presumably Weston--despise him; and Agnes' studied contempt for Hatfield's brutality misses its mark because he does not even see it. In all of these examples we see how difficult it may be to use one's body to convey a certain impression. One's message may simply not be seen, it may be read incorrectly, or if it is intended to convey a false impression, a good reader of bodies may not be fooled.

However, some characters in the novel are very successful at using their bodies to hide their feelings. It makes sense that a character such as Rosalie would use her body to deceive others--in her it is quite typical that she would tell Hatfield that his being rich would make no difference to her refusal of his marriage proposal. In recounting the scene to Agnes, she says,

> It was a great lie, but he looked so confident in his own attractions still, that I determined not to leave him one stone upon another. He looked me full in the face; but I kept my countenance so well that he could not imagine I was saying anything more than the actual truth. (176)

Given Agnes' usual honesty and integrity, however, it seems superficially surprising that, at least in physical terms, Agnes should be the real arch deceiver of the novel, in the sense that she devotes so much effort to disguising her feelings. It might be suggested that it is only Agnes' insecurity and inferior social station in her two positions that make her so eager to hide her feelings, but in fact she tries to fool even her parents. Of the night before she leaves her family for her first governessing position, she writes, "My dear friends looked so sad, and spoke so very kindly, that I could scarcely keep my eyes from overflowing; but I still affected to be gay" (70). She strokes the cat "with a feeling of sadness [she] could not easily disguise" (71). The next morning, she says,

> I rose, washed, dressed, swallowed a hasty breakfast, received the fond embraces of my father, mother, and sister, kissed the cat, to the great scandal of Sally, the maid, shook hands with her, mounted the gig, drew my veil over my face, and then, but not till then, burst into a flood of tears. (71)

Is she controlling her body for others' sake, not wanting them to worry even more about her going off to her new situation, or does she want to seem strong and mature, and not let them know how afraid she is? Her attempt to hide

her feelings, if the members of her family do not understand it, may hurt them by making them feel that she does not so much mind leaving them.

Strangely enough, we get a similar sort of attitude toward hiding one's feelings in Brontë's poetry. In "Self Congratulation," what is thought to be Anne's first personal, rather than Gondal, poem, and a poem thought to be written with reference to Willy Weightman (Poems 169), we get a celebration of successful disguise, even the deceiving of "friends" and "comrades":

A FRAGMENT, written January 1st 1840

'Maiden, thou wert thoughtless once
Of beauty or of grace,
Simple and homely in attire
Careless of form and face.
Then whence this change, and why so oft
Dost smooth thy hazel hair?
And wherefore deck thy youthful form
With such unwearied care?

'Tell us--and cease to tire our ears
With yonder hackneyed strain--
Why wilt thou play those simple tunes
So often o'er again?'
'Nay, gentle friends, I can but say
That childhood's thoughts are gone.
Each year its own new feelings brings
And years move swiftly on,

And for those little simple airs,
I love to play them o'er--
So much I dare not promise now
To play them never more.'
I answered and it was enough;
They turned them to depart;
They could not read my secret thoughts
Nor see my throbbing heart.

I've noticed many a youthful form
Upon whose changeful face

The inmost workings of the soul
The gazer's eye might trace.
The speaking eye, the changing lip,
The ready blushing cheek,
The smiling or beclouded brow
Their different feelings speak.

But, thank God! you might gaze on mine
For hours and never know
The secret changes of my soul
From joy to bitter woe.
Last night as we sat round the fire
Conversing merrily,
We heard without approaching steps
Of one well known to me.

There was no trembling in my voice,
No blush upon my cheek,
No lustrous sparkle in my eyes
Of hope or joy to speak.
But O my spirit burned within,
My heart beat thick and fast.
He came not nigh--he went away
And then my joy was past.

And yet my comrades marked it not,
My voice was still the same;
They saw me smile, and o'er my face--
No signs of sadness came;
They little knew my hidden thoughts
And they will never know
The anguish of my drooping heart,
The bitter aching woe! (Poems, 71-2)

Edward Chitham writes of Anne and what she reveals in this poem that, "This weak exterior covering passion misled many, including Charlotte, into devaluing Anne" (Poems 169). I suspect the same might be said of Agnes. It is certainly clear that even her mother has no notion that she is pining away for love.

If Agnes sees fit to deceive her loved ones, she finds it all the more important to deceive those less close to her, especially when anything hurts her. This is

particularly true in her position at the Murrays', where she must watch in silence while Rosalie attempts to toy with Weston. When Agnes fears that Rosalie may be right in thinking that Weston is attracted to her, we hear

> My first impulse was to sink into the chair beside the bed, and, laying my head on the pillow, to seek relief in a passionate burst of tears: there was an imperative craving for such an indulgence; but alas! I must restrain and swallow back my feeling still: there was the bell--the odious bell for the school-room dinner; and I must go down with a calm face, and smile, and laugh, and talk nonsense--yes, and eat, too, if possible, as if all were right, and I were just returned from a pleasant walk. (187)

She speaks of her trials listening to the Murray sisters talk of Weston:

> I was accustomed, now, to keeping silence when things distasteful to my ear were uttered; and now, too, I was used to wearing a placid smiling countenance when my heart was bitter within me. Only those who have felt the like can imagine my feelings, as I sat with an assumption of smiling indifference .... (199)

She is indeed, as she admits, " a close and resolute dissembler" (200).

Agnes does to some extent need to hide her feeling from those around her, but it is probably the case that because she is shy and insecure, she does so more than she needs to. In fact, one wonders whether those around her would like, respect and sympathize with her more if she were a little more inclined to show her feelings--to show herself to be more like them. For Rosalie and Matilda, she may well seem a bit of a cold fish, without many feelings

to hurt.

Toward the end of the novel, Agnes comes to learn that she need not necessarily deceive, and finds that the change can be rewarding. We hear of this scene which occurs during Agnes' visit to the married Rosalie, as her hostess shows her the house:

> The drawing-room was certainly an imposing apartment, and very elegantly furnished; but I saw its young mistress glance towards me as we entered, as if to notice how I was impressed by the spectacle, and, accordingly, I determined to preserve an aspect of stony indifference, as if I saw nothing at all remarkable--but this was only for a moment: immediately conscience whispered, 'Why should I disappoint her to save my pride? No--rather let me sacrifice my pride to give her a little innocent gratification.' And I honestly looked round, and told her it was a noble room, and very tastefully furnished. She said little, but I saw she was pleased. (230)

This is such a small thing for Agnes to do, and yet it shows great growth in her maturity.

Of course one of Agnes' final goals must be to find someone whom she has no need or desire to deceive. When she first gets to know Weston, she feels that she must hide her feelings from him. We hear of her meeting Mr. Weston on a walk. She writes,

> This is what I had long desired; but now, for a moment, I wished either he or I were away; I felt my heart throb so violently that I dreaded lest some outward signs of emotion should appear; but I think he hardly glanced at me, and I was soon calm enough. (207)

Weston's proposal of marriage means that Agnes need no longer hide anything from him. She tells us of the scene:

"He laid his hand on mine that rested on his arm: he must have felt it tremble ... but that was no great matter now" (249). Agnes is finally free, and her body may reveal what it will.

Throughout the novel, Agnes has been like Sartre's famous waiter, acting the role of governess in bad faith (Sartre 101-02). Only in the end does she achieve the luxury of being true to herself.

Chapter Four

The Unfree Body

There is so much physical restriction in Agnes Grey that it would be a grave omission not to address the ways in which bodies are controlled by others in the novel. In this context, social class becomes particularly apparent. Agnes is often literally put in the position where someone else dictates where she must put or what she must do with her body, no matter how irrational or destructive what they ask may be. Over the course of the novel, Agnes must take action to make her body more free before she can achieve any happiness.

At the beginning of the novel Agnes is even at the mercy of thoughtless children if they are her superiors in status, as we see in the way she is treated by the Bloomfield children. When she first meets Tom he requires her to watch him ride his rocking-horse, and "stand for ten minutes, watching how manfully he used his whip and spurs" (77). Presently the "consequential little gentleman" orders her to put on her bonnet and come for a walk, insisting "I shall allow of no excuses" (77). As Agnes

says, "And as it was the first day of our acquaintance, I thought I might as well indulge him" (77).

Agnes will not have the luxury of believing that she is indulging him for long. This will be the inviolable pattern of her new life:

> I found they had no notion of going with me: I must go with them wherever they chose to lead me. I must run, walk, or stand exactly as it suited their fancy ... either I must follow them, or keep entirely apart from them, and thus appear neglectful of my charge. (81-82)

The Bloomfield children are often even physically violent with Agnes, and she soon wishes that she could wield some of the same power, recognizing that if she could physically punish the Bloomfields in certain situations, they might well behave differently. We hear that "A few sound boxes on the ear, on such occasions, might have settled the matter easily enough" (84). Later, Agnes writes, "Here again, a good birch rod might have been serviceable" (85). As she says, however, because Tom

> might make up some story to his mother ... I determined to refrain from striking him even in self-defense; and, in his most violent moods, my only resource was to throw him on his back, and hold his hands and feet till the frenzy was somewhat abated. (85)

Agnes does not entirely manage to live up to her wise intentions, however. She writes,

> Sometimes, exasperated to the utmost pitch, I would shake [Mary Ann] violently by the shoulders, or pull her long hair, or put her in the corner,--for which she punished me with loud, shrill, piercing screams, that went through my

head like a knife. (88)

Mary Ann in fact becomes the most trying of all the children, and Agnes has at least one acquaintance, the children's nurse, who seems to think that Mary Ann cannot be handled without physical punishment. The nurse's fate shows the futility of that resource for controlling the children. She says,

> 'I don't vex myself o'er 'em as you do. And then, you see, I hit 'em a slap sometimes; and them little uns--I gives 'em a good whipping now and then--there's nothing else ull do for 'em, as what they say. Howsever, I've lost my place for it.'
>
> 'Have you, Betty? I heard you were going to leave.'
>
> 'Eh, bless you, yes! Misses gave me warning a three-wik sin'. She told be afore Christmas how it mud be, if I hit 'em again; but I couldn't hold my hand off 'em at nothing--I know not how you do, for Miss Mary Ann's worse by the half nor her sisters!' (101)

Unfortunately, being defenceless is simply written into Agnes' position as governess.

The remarkable cruelties practised by the Bloomfields on animals' bodies is a masterfully extreme illustration of the thoughtless and cruel treatment that the children, following the lead of their parents and their social class, extended to those over whom they have power. At one point Agnes kills a nest of birds by crushing them with a big stone to save them from the worse fate that Tom has in store for them--and then is reprimanded by her "betters" for spoiling the poor child's fun. Agnes and Mrs.

Bloomfield conflict over this:

> 'I am sorry, Miss Grey, you should think it necessary to interfere with Master Bloomfield's amusements; he was very much distressed about your destroying the birds.'
> 'When Master Bloomfield's amusements consist in injuring sentient creatures,' I answered, 'I think it is my duty to interfere.'
> 'You seem to have forgotten,' said she, calmly, 'that the creatures were all created for our convenience.'

In the same conversation Mrs. Bloomfield says, 'I think ... a child's amusement is scarcely to be weighed against the welfare of a soulless brute' (105). One gets the impression that Mrs. Bloomfield feels rather the same about governesses as she does about animals, and in this she is only following the lead of her social class. She certainly does feel free to say to Agnes, "You see, Miss Grey, it is just the same as any other trade or profession; they that wish to prosper must devote themselves body and soul to their calling" (207). Agnes' body cannot be her own.

In any case, the children's propensities are certainly encouraged by their elders. A number of other people in the novel are not much better than the children in their treatment of animals. One of these is Mr. Robson, who

> encouraged Tom's propensity to persecute the lower creation, both by precept and example. As he frequently came to course or shoot over his brother-in-law's grounds, he would bring his favourite dogs with him, and he treated them so brutally that, poor as I was, I would have given a sovereign any day to see one of them bite him, provided the animal could have done it with

impunity. (103)

Mr. Hatfield is no better. We hear that he "with his cane, administered a resounding thwack upon [Agnes' dog's] scull, and sent it yelping back to [her], with a clamorous outcry that afforded the reverend gentleman great amusement" (170). On another occasion he kicks a "poor cat right across th' floor, an' went after [Rosalie and Matilda] as gay as a lark" (148). Matilda, of course, given her joy in hunting rabbits, is no better. Those characters in the novel that can treat animals in this way lack the bodily sympathy, which I discussed before with reference to Agnes and Weston, necessary to make them considerate to Agnes or others over whom they have power.

Agnes is trapped by her job, her social class, her gender and by her restrictive society in general. At one point we are made to realize how constrained a Victorian woman in Agnes position could be. Agnes, talking of being on a walk, says,

> At length, I descried, high up between the twisted roots of an oak, three lovely primroses .... I could not reach them unless I climbed the bank, which I was deterred from doing by hearing a footstep at that moment behind me. (163)

A footstep, the presence of another, makes it immodest to do anything so physical, so unlady-like, as to climb a bank.

However, while Agnes is trapped by her circumstances, I think that she is also partly responsible for her own

entrapment. It emerges that at least in her second position, with the Murrays, Agnes says nothing to defend herself from their lack of consideration. We get a sense of this on several occasions. Here Agnes reports a conversation that she has with Rosalie and Matilda about her getting motion sickness when she is put in the position of sitting backwards in the carriage.

> 'It's very odd, Miss Grey, that the carriage should always make you sick; it never makes me,' remarked Miss Matilda.
>
> 'Nor me either,' said her sister, 'but I dare say it would, if I sat where she does--such a nasty, horrid place, Miss Grey; I wonder how you can bear it!'
>
> I am obliged to bear it, since no choice is left me--I might have answered; but in tenderness for their feelings, I only replied--
>
> 'Oh! it is but a short way, and if I am not sick in church, I don't mind it.' (126-7)

How are they to know that her problems are serious? Again we hear of the Murray children,

> Often they would do their lessons in the open air, which I had nothing to say against, except that I frequently caught cold by sitting on the damp grass, or from exposure to the evening dew, or some such insidious draught, which seemed to have no injurious effect on them. It was quite right that they should be hardy; yet, surely, they might have been taught some consideration for others who were less so. But I must not blame them for what was, perhaps, my own fault; for I never made any particular objections to sitting where they pleased, foolishly choosing to risk the consequences, rather than trouble them for my convenience. (128)
>
> Whether I walked with the young ladies or rode with their parents, depended entirely upon their own capricious will; I liked walking better, but a sense of reluctance to obtrude my presence on any one who did not desire it, always kept me passive on these and similar occasions.

(161)

At least on these occasions she begins to recognize that the situation may have been partly due to her own timidity.

It seems to me that Agnes' lack of power over her body is a fundamental part of her unhappiness throughout the novel. Our bodies form a large part of our conception of self, so that in order for Agnes to have a sense of herself and her own autonomy, she will have to be in a position where she is far more in control of her body. This will not happen until she leaves her last governessing position and becomes her own mistress, or at the worst finds herself under the control of people--her mother and then later Weston--who will respect her sense of self. One of Weston's virtues is that he does care for and respect Agnes' body, even when it is simply a matter of realizing that he has been walking too quickly for her (249).

Near the end of the novel we finally see Agnes truly physically free and happy. She walks by the sea that Brontë so loved, filled with pure sensuous joy:

> There was a feeling of freshness and vigour in the very streets; and when I got free of the town, when my foot was on the sands and my face towards the broad, bright bay ... no language can describe the effect of the deep, clear azure of the sky and ocean, the bright morning sunshine on the semi-circular barrier of craggy cliffs surmounted by green swelling hills, and on the smooth, wide sands, and the low rocks out at sea ... looking, with their clothing of weeds and moss, like little grass-grown islands--and above all, on the brilliant, sparkling waves. And then, the unspeakable purity and freshness of the

> air! there was just enough heat to enhance the value of the breeze, and just enough wind to keep the whole sea in motion, to make the waves come bounding to the shore, foaming and sparkling, as if wild with glee. ...
>
> Refreshed, delighted, invigorated, I walked along, forgetting all my cares, feeling as if I had wings to my feet, and could go at least forty miles without fatigue, and experiencing a sense of exhilaration to which I had been an entire stranger since the days of early youth. (240-41)

From being in the quintessentially restricted position of governess, Agnes has finally come into a position where she has the physical freedom without which, it seems, she cannot prosper.

I hope that I have shown that Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey is well worth studying in terms of the body. In fact I find that it is far more so than Brontë's other novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. That novel has two narrators: the one is male, an arrogant young gentleman farmer, and the other is an upper-middle-class woman who marries a rake. She is also a mother. With neither of them does Brontë have much in common. Brontë was never male, never a farmer, never upper-middle-class, never a mother. I think that what makes Agnes Grey so worth studying in terms of the body is that Brontë was a governess, and was a governess who lived the incredibly physically constrained life that she gives to her character. Brontë's body was for many years the unfree body discussed in this chapter, and like Agnes, she found her only respite from physical strain was to stop governessing. Brontë lived much of what

Agnes does, from taking so much pleasure in sensuous things to suffering from psychosomatic illnesses. For all the aspects of the body discussed in this paper, we can find parallels in Brontë's own life. Agnes Grey is far more powerful than The Tenant of Wildfell Hall in terms of its evocation of bodily experience, and I think that it is the autobiographical elements in the novel that make it so. It is only sad that Brontë's own life could not have an ending as happy as that which she gives to her creation.

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